

Facing Cancer with Courage

Although it's not a cure, yoga can help you survive cancer with strength, hope, and vitality.

by Carol Krucoff
photography by Joyce Tenneson

When Michelle Parodi was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003, a miraculous thing happened: Her life was transformed for the better. "Before my diagnosis, I wasn't happy," she says. "I wasn't centered on what mattered most to me: dance, music, my family, working with children." Instead, the 37-year-old San Francisco native was immersed in the corporate world and frantically racing toward what looked like a better future just over the horizon.

Cancer changed everything. The illness and treatments—surgery followed by three months of chemotherapy and three more of radiation—forced her to slow down and steered her toward calming activities like yoga, acupuncture, and massage.

She began asana practice two months after surgery. "It helped me reconnect with my body and deal with all the aches and joint pain that accompanied chemo," Parodi says. "But yoga's breathing and meditation and spiritual teachings were even more important. Swami Satchidananda's teaching about nonattachment—the idea that I'm not my body, my feelings, or my thoughts—was a huge relief and freedom. And breathing and meditation helped me to be present, over and over."

Parodi, who demonstrates the poses shown here, says she's thankful—not for cancer but for what it has given her: the gift of yoga and the seeds of a more meaningful life.

Connie Hawley followed a different path but ended in a space similar to Parodi's after learning that she had an aggressive and advanced form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Her first reaction was to put up a fight. "I developed a war mentality," says Hawley, who was a 31-year-old speech pathologist in Kalamazoo, Michigan, at the time of her 1993 diagnosis. "I steeled myself for a battle to beat this cancer."

But after six months of aggressive chemotherapy, which left her headachy, weak, and nauseous, a weary Hawley declared a truce. "I was totally exhausted, from both the treatments and the fighting," she says. "The cancer was getting worse. I felt awful and depressed." One morning when she had barely enough energy to brush her teeth, Hawley lay on the floor and started doing some breathing and gentle stretches she remembered from a yoga class she'd taken several years earlier.

"Little by little, a voice came through encouraging me to make peace with my body and appreciate the things that were OK," says Hawley, who continued her gentle yoga practice during the following year and a half of chemotherapy. "Yoga helped me come into a nurturing energy, to befriend my body, listen to it, and treat myself with gentleness and compassion."

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Move Through Recovery

This sequence, called Ease, is adapted from the book *Healing Yoga for People Living with Cancer*, by Lisa Holtby (Taylor Trade, 2004). Holtby offers these instructions for safety and maximum benefit.

- Enjoy each pose for several slow, easy breaths.
- Practice so you feel pleasantly challenged but do not experience any pain.
- If you have bone metastases or open wounds, or if your platelet count is less than 50,000, do not practice this sequence without your physician's permission.
- If you have lymphedema, consult your physician to assess which poses are appropriate for you, always wear a protective cuff when practicing yoga, and skip any poses that place too much pressure on your affected limb(s).

1 Extended Balasana (Child's Pose)

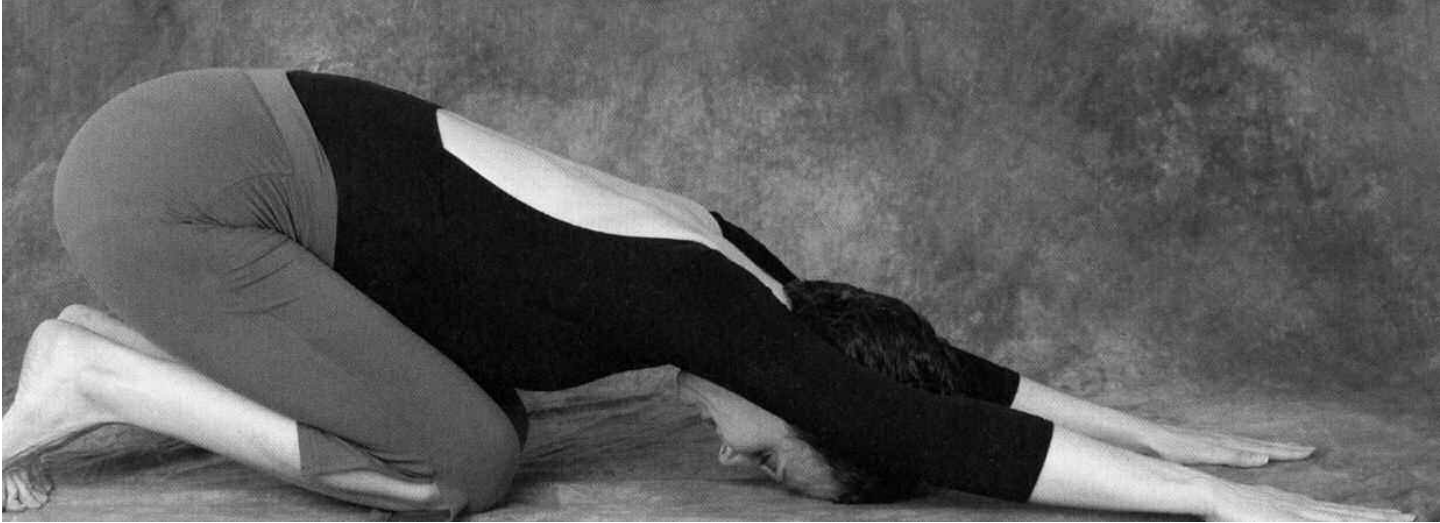
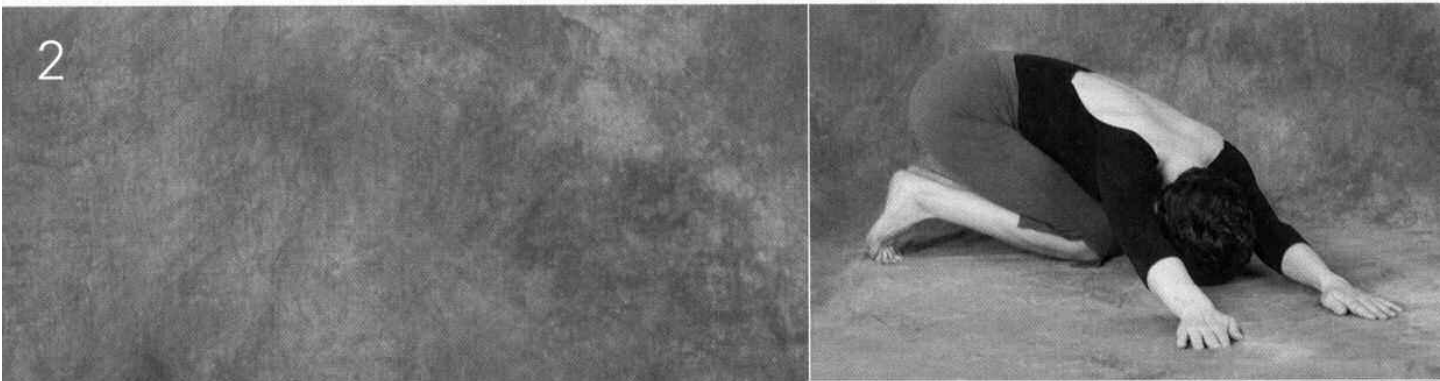
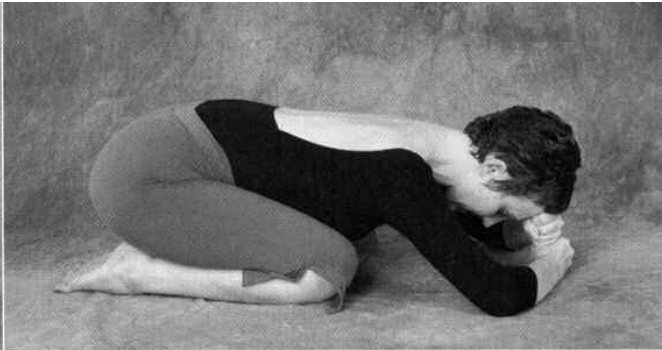
Come onto your hands and knees with your hands directly under your shoulders, your knees about 12 inches behind your hips, the tops of your feet on the ground, and your feet together. Then draw your hips back and down so your buttocks rest on or at least close to your heels. If your belly or chest presses uncomfortably against your thighs, spread your knees apart and let your belly ease down between your thighs, but continue to keep your feet together. Extend your arms forward and let your palms and forehead rest on the ground. If your forehead doesn't comfortably reach the ground, rest it on your stacked open hands or fists. On the inhalation, notice how your breath expands your back. On the exhalation, release more deeply into the pose.

2 Adho Mukha Svanasana Variation (Downward-Facing Dog Pose Variation)

Come onto your hands and knees with your palms on the ground directly beneath your shoulders, fingers spread wide, your knees about 12 inches behind your hips, and your feet together. Curl your toes under, then draw your hips back and down so your buttocks come close to your heels. If your belly or chest presses uncomfortably against your thighs, widen your knees apart but keep your feet together. To energize your arms, draw the heads of the upper arm bones into the shoulder joints and, as you press your palms down, lift your forearms up toward the sky.

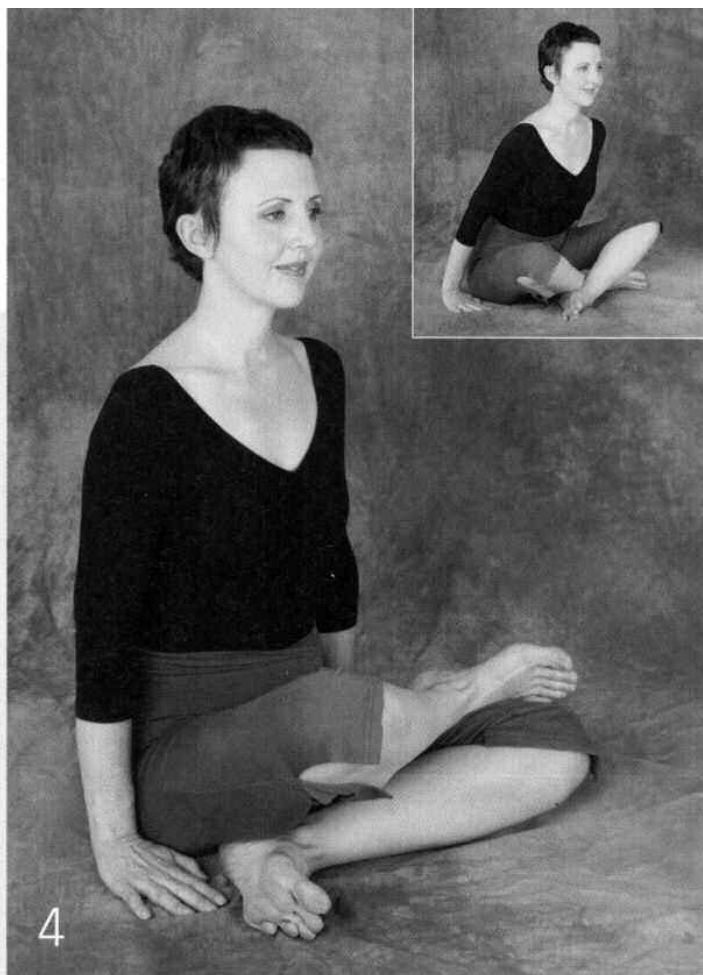
On the inhalation, notice how your rib cage expands. On the exhalation, reach your hips back as you creep your hands forward. To intensify the pose, take a side stretch by keeping your hips anchored back and down and your arms energized as you walk your arms and torso to the right. Return to center and then repeat the pose, taking the side stretch to the left.

MICHELLE PARODI,
a survivor of breast cancer
demonstrates the asanas
presented in this article.



4 Agnistambhasana (Fire Log Pose)

Take a comfortable cross-legged position, sitting with your spine lengthened. Lightly shrug your shoulders up, strongly roll the heads of your arm bones back, and press the bottom tips of your shoulder blades into your back. Then stack your shins directly over each other like logs on a woodpile: Bring the outside of your right ankle directly on top of your left knee and slide your left shin forward so your left ankle is directly under your right knee. Your right foot should hang outside your left knee so you can wiggle your right foot freely. Flex your feet and spread your toes. (If this is uncomfortable, if your spine rounds, or if you tip over onto one buttock, modify the pose by crossing your shins instead of stacking them.) Keeping your sitting bones grounded and your spine long, fold forward from your hip creases as you exhale. As you inhale, notice how your torso rises slightly; on the next exhalation, try to fold more deeply. To come out of the pose, return to sitting upright and uncross your legs. Then repeat with the left leg on top.



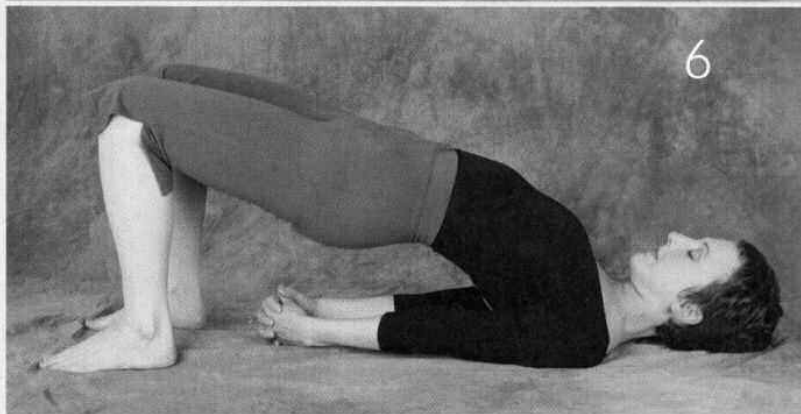
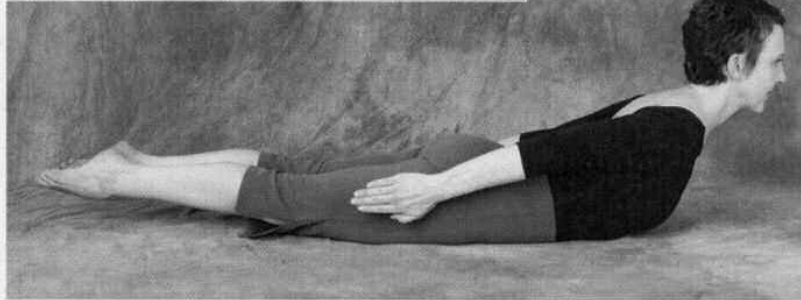
5 Salabhasana (Locust Pose)

Lie on your belly with your forehead on the floor. Bring your arms by your sides, parallel to the ground, palms facing each other. Spread your toes and press the tops of your feet into the ground. To avoid compression in the lower back, roll your inner thighs up toward the sky, broaden the back of your pelvis, then move your tailbone toward your heels. Roll the heads of your arm bones strongly up and back, then float your head and chest up away from the ground and, with legs together and knees straight, lift your legs toward the sky. If your back feels safe and strong, reach your arms out to the sides as though you're flying through the air. To come out, release your arms and legs to the ground, turn your head to one side, and rest your head on your hands. Let your whole body relax.



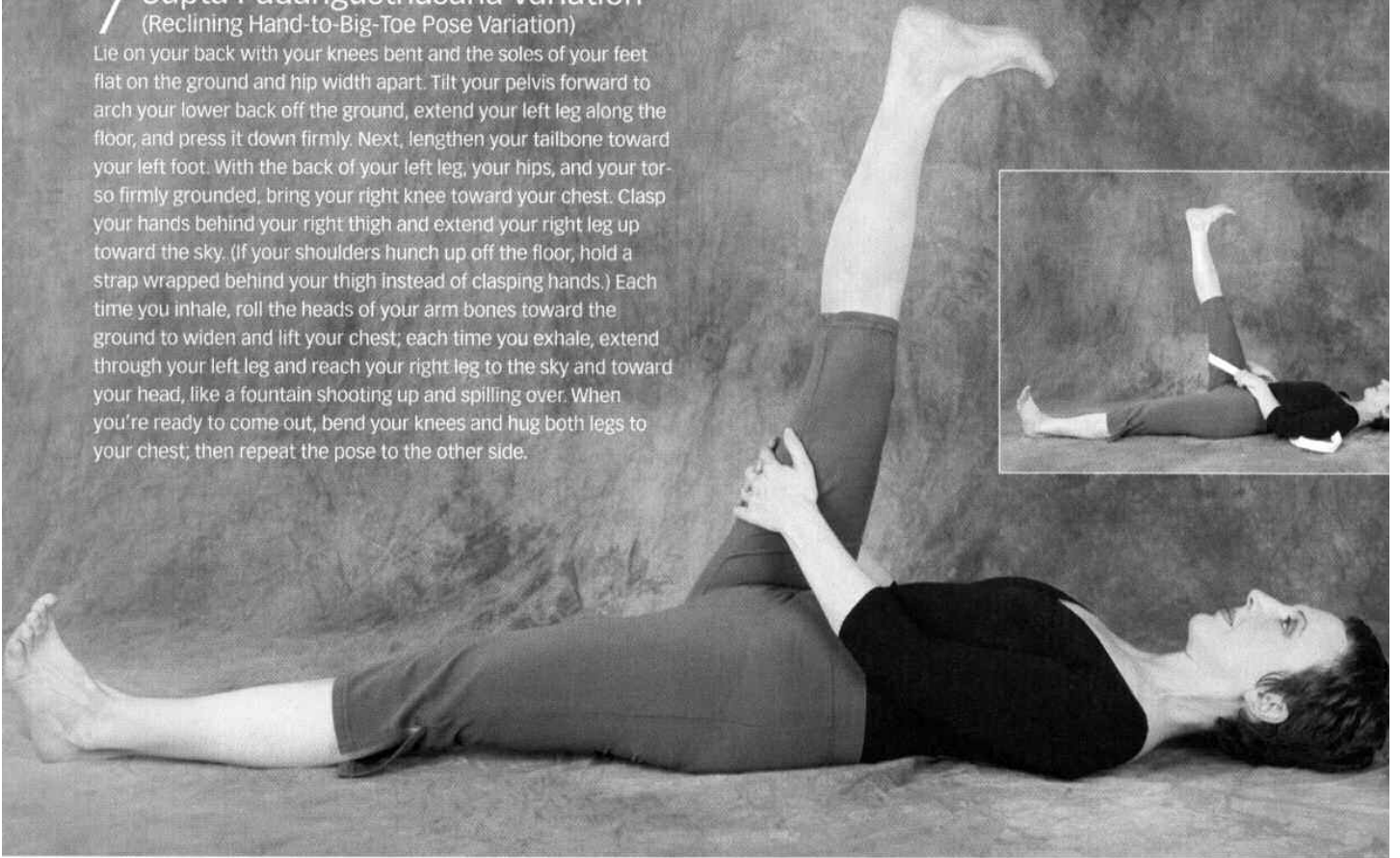
6 Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose)

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the ground parallel to each other and hip width apart, with your heels about 6 inches away from your buttocks. Bring your arms down by your sides, lightly shrug your shoulders toward your head, and then roll the heads of your arm bones back, rooting them into the ground. You will feel the muscles around your shoulder blades strengthen, like hands supporting the lift of your heart. Pressing your shoulders into the floor, arch your upper back. Then, continuing to lift your hips, lengthen your tailbone toward your knees. Press down through your legs and feet. Extend your arms on the floor and clasp your hands or hold a strap. When your torso and pelvis feel buoyant, tuck one shoulder at a time under you, bringing them toward your centerline, not your hips. Imagine your breath creating space in your chest for your heart to expand. Release your arms and slowly roll your spine down to the floor. Hug your knees to your chest and rest.



7 Supta Padangusthasana Variation (Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose Variation)

Lie on your back with your knees bent and the soles of your feet flat on the ground and hip width apart. Tilt your pelvis forward to arch your lower back off the ground, extend your left leg along the floor, and press it down firmly. Next, lengthen your tailbone toward your left foot. With the back of your left leg, your hips, and your torso firmly grounded, bring your right knee toward your chest. Clasp your hands behind your right thigh and extend your right leg up toward the sky. (If your shoulders hunch up off the floor, hold a strap wrapped behind your thigh instead of clasping hands.) Each time you inhale, roll the heads of your arm bones toward the ground to widen and lift your chest; each time you exhale, extend through your left leg and reach your right leg to the sky and toward your head, like a fountain shooting up and spilling over. When you're ready to come out, bend your knees and hug both legs to your chest; then repeat the pose to the other side.



8 Happy Baby Pose Variation

Lie on your back and hug your knees to your chest. Clasp your hands behind your thighs to help you snuggle your legs closer to your torso. Don't let your shoulders hunch up off the floor; if they do, hold a strap behind your thighs instead of clasping your hands, so your shoulders can rest on the ground. Notice how your breath expands your core: As you inhale, your lower back fills out, your belly presses out against your thighs, and the sides of your rib cage widen. As you exhale, relax your face and jaw and hug your thighs closer to your chest. To come out, release your arms and bring your feet to the ground.



During long hours in doctors' offices and treatment rooms, Hawley would place a hand on her belly, close her eyes, and do pranayama (breathwork), such as breathing deeply into her diaphragm or extending her exhalations. She also incorporated visualization into her visits: When a CAT scan technician asked her to take a deep breath, she'd inhale slowly through her nose and visualize all the sacs in her lungs opening to accept prana (vital energy). In August 1995, her doctors informed her that she was in total remission.

"Yoga is an incredible tool for accessing the body's amazing capacity to heal itself," says Hawley, who still undergoes annual tests to monitor for relapse or recurrence. Drawn to share yoga's gifts, she has completed a teacher training program at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health and attended teacher training programs at the Himalayan Institute and Integrative Yoga Therapy. Now living in Houghton, Michigan, she offers yoga classes as a wellness tool and has worked with people who have serious illnesses. Her oncologist also has become interested in using yoga to help his patients. "Yoga may not cure people with cancer," Hawley says, "but it can certainly help them heal."

Two of America's nearly 10 million cancer survivors, Hawley and Parodi are part of a growing movement that harnesses the healing power of yoga's breathing practices, meditation techniques, and physical poses. Although cancer was once considered a death sentence, many types of it are increasingly being viewed as chronic conditions not unlike heart disease or diabetes. Advances in diagnosis and treatment mean that even when a cure isn't possible, long-term survival often is, notes Julia Rowland, director of the National Cancer Institute's Office of Cancer Survivorship.

Breathing: It's Right Under Your Nose

Many aspects of yoga practice are helpful for patients dealing with the physical and emotional toll of cancer treatments. Moving through postures helps restore physical functioning and well-being. But many cancer survivors and yoga teachers say the single most important practice can be pranayama, which can relax the body, still the mind, and help people connect with their spirit.

"Using the breath as a tool to release tension and anxiety is unknown to many people," says Faith Isaacs, a therapist and yoga teacher who in 2002 helped establish a yoga program for cancer patients at Valley Hope Hospital's Center for Complementary Therapies in Ridgewood, New Jersey. "When you walk into the chemotherapy room, you can feel how strained and anxious people are—many of them are holding their breath." One of the reasons for pranayama's effectiveness is its sheer adaptability:

Breathing practices can be done anywhere, anytime—in hospital beds, in treatment rooms, and during long, anxious periods of waiting for test results, doctor's appointments, and surgical procedures—by people in all stages of illness or health.

Simply learning how to take a deep, full breath can be extremely therapeutic in many situations, Isaacs says. Deep belly breathing calms both body and mind, she says, "and it's easy to learn, it doesn't cost anything, and you take it wherever you go." In addition to relaxing "wired" people and energizing tired people, Isaacs adds, "breathing techniques give patients a sense of being able to take part in their treatment. Cancer patients are so used to having things done to them and for them all the time. It's very empowering to have something they can do for themselves."

Deep diaphragmatic breathing also helps rid the body of gaseous chemicals and can bring as much as seven times more oxygen into the lungs as shallow breathing, says Jnani Chapman, a registered nurse and certified massage therapist who directs the clinical yoga programs at the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and the Ida & Joseph Friend Cancer Resource Center at UCSF.

The best pranayama practices for cancer patients are the simplest ones, Chapman says; she recommends deep abdominal breathing and extended exhalations (see "*The Healing Power of the Breath*," below). "This is not the time for anything complicated or for breath retention," she says. "Too many people have been holding their breath all their lives."

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The Healing Power of the Breath

One of the most helpful yoga practices for cancer patients undergoing harsh treatments is pranayama. Jnani Chapman, a registered nurse and certified massage therapist who runs the clinical yoga programs at the Ida & Joseph Friend Cancer Resource Center and the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, both at the University of California, San Francisco, offers these instructions for an effective breathing practice.

Rising and Falling Breath

BENEFITS: Strengthens the nervous system and calms anxiety.

HOW TO DO IT: Lie on your back with your hands resting on your abdomen. Tune in to your breath. On the inhalation, consciously expand your belly as if you were inflating a balloon. Let your breath continue rising up through your rib cage and out to the sides; you should feel the top of your lungs inflate and your collarbones rise. Begin your exhalation at the top of the lungs, so

that as you release air there, your collarbones lower. As the exhalation continues—with the ribs contracting in and down—draw your abdominal muscles in and bring your belly button toward your spine. Let your exhalation be long and slow. If you are counting, try to exhale for longer than you inhale for each breath. While you breathe, keep your torso completely relaxed. Don't let the muscles in your rib cage tense or tighten as they move; simply let them expand and contract with each breath.

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Pranayama coupled with visualization helped 52-year-old Pauline Fray through a yearlong hospitalization nearly four years ago for treatment of acute myeloid leukemia. "I used belly breathing a lot of the time to calm my mind and body, particularly during a lengthy process such as having a femoral line inserted, which could take two hours," recalls Fray, a yoga teacher in Surrey, England, whose fingernails, toenails, and hair fell out several times

as a result of treatments. "To try to get to sleep at night, I would use alternate-nasal breathing. And if I was running a temperature, I'd use Cooling Breath [Sitali Pranayama]." Fray often accompanied her breathing practices with imagery. "Each day, I would use my breathing to calm my mind and visualize my blood cells as healthy, plump, and gorgeous," she recalls. Now, having regained most of her mobility and flexibility—as well as new bone marrow (her own, cleaned and

recycled)—Fray says, "I learned that, having been hit by the necessary hammer of Western medicine to save my life, I needed complementary therapies like yoga to regain my health."

Meditation: The Benefit of Silence

In addition to working with the breath, many cancer patients find that meditation is a powerful yogic tool to cope with unpleasant treatments. "When people meditate, their true nature shines through, reminding them who they are," says Nischala Joy Devi, a yoga teacher in Northern California who created one of the country's first yoga programs for people with cancer in 1982 as part of the Commonwealth Cancer Help Program in Bolinas, California. "They are not their cancer, and they are not just their bodies," Devi says. "They are divine beings."

Meditation gives people a sense of hope and optimism that can stimulate the immune system, Devi says. "Twenty years ago, people said it was ridiculous to think that something like yoga could have any effect on something as strong as cancer. But today, there's a greater appreciation for the power of the mind to heal and a recognition that thoughts and feelings can trigger cells on a physiologic level."

When combined with the yogic principle of *ahimsa* (nonharming), meditation aids in harnessing this therapeutic effect. "How we view the cancer, the treatments, and ourselves is very important to healing," Devi says, adding that chemotherapy is typically considered a poison that kills cancer cells. "Taking a poison is a frightening concept," she says. "The more we talk about something as negative, the more our body sets itself up to reject it." Instead, Devi advises patients to adopt an attitude of *ahimsa* and meditate on chemotherapy as "a nectar that helps the body rid itself of what it doesn't want. This can help people heal and not be so adversely affected by side effects."

Ahimsa also teaches people to treat their bodies with love, which can be extremely therapeutic for patients who feel betrayed or repulsed by affected body parts. "I encourage people to touch their scars and say nice things to a breast that

has been removed, because energetically it's still there," Devi says. "Yoga reminds people that regardless of whatever's been cut out or scarred, on a subtle level they are still whole." These practices help people let go of fear and tension, which can block the flow of prana and result in pain. "When you allow prana to flow, the reduction in pain can be quite dramatic," Devi explains.

After being diagnosed with breast cancer in May 2003, Betsy Flagg created a ritual that incorporated the most meaningful aspects of her yoga practice. "In the waiting room, I sit in Sukhasana (Easy Pose) and listen to Sanskrit chanting by artists such as Krishna Das, Shakti Fusion, or Deva Premal," says Flagg, 51, who works at IBM in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, and has been practicing yoga for nearly a decade. Since her Walkman isn't allowed in the radiation therapy room, she brings earplugs to protect her ears from the noisy equipment and to encourage *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal), which deepens her meditation. "I bless my breast, the radiation machine, the room, and all who enter," Flagg says. She does a variety of breathing practices, including Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath) and Viloma Pranayama (Interval Breath), while meditating on being bathed in healing light.

The yogic principle of *Ishvara prani-dhana* (devotion) is central to her practice of Anusara Yoga. "I didn't choose the disease, but I can choose my attitude," Flagg says. "I trust that the Divine has my best interests at the forefront. Grace abounds. My job is to be as fully present as I can be and accepting of whatever life serves up." Among the most powerful lessons of this experience, she says, "is that you can go through trauma and still find beauty."

Asana: Befriending the Body

In the best of times, asana practice allows us to reconnect with our bodies. But for those dealing with cancer treatments, doing yoga postures takes on another layer of importance. "With cancer, it's common to feel like your body has betrayed you," says Lisa Holtby, who taught twice-weekly classes for clients of the Seattle agency Cancer Lifeline for two years. "A

regular asana practice can help students experience their bodies as capable and reliable again." After surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation therapy, appropriately modified postures can help realign scar tissue's collagen strands and help the body regain lost strength and flexibility, Holtby says. (She required students to communicate with their physicians about the specifics of their practice.)

In contrast to her typical yoga classes, which begin with standing postures,

Holtby began her Cancer Lifeline classes with restorative poses. "I tried to hold the space for my students to simply be where they were, so they felt supported to cry or be in a bad mood or just rest," says Holtby, who offers four sequences of modified asanas in her book *Healing Yoga for People Living with Cancer* (Taylor Trade, 2004). Although she recommends that women who have recently had mastectomies avoid certain postures, such as Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing

Dog Pose), she generally encourages a wide array of poses. “In my experience, it is the challenging stuff that gets these students going,” Holtby says. Backbends in particular are mood brighteners and relieve depression. And, for those who are ready, supported inversions can shift perspective.

“I remember setting up a Headstand for a gal in her 50s who had never done the pose before,” says Holtby, who used extensive props and spotters to help this breast cancer survivor into a modified Sirsasana (Headstand). “It was incredible to see her experience herself as powerful,” she relates.

Asana practice also helps relieve joint and muscle aches that can be a side effect of medications, says Maureen Wolfson, 58, a retired financial services executive who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003 and had surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation treatments. “I was often very sore and achy from the drugs I was taking, and found that the yoga class really helped me relax physically and get calm

mentally,” says Wolfson, who took Faith Isaacs’s yoga class at Valley Hope Hospital’s Center for Complementary Therapies. “No matter how awful I felt going to class—and sometimes I had to drag myself there—I always went,” she adds, “because I knew I would feel so much better afterward.”

It’s common for patients to come to class even when they know they can’t really do much. The camaraderie alone can be healing.

It’s common for patients to come to class even when they know they can’t really do much, says Lynne Jaffe, who since 1997 has taught a yoga class for cancer patients at the Cornucopia House Cancer Support Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. “The camaraderie alone can be healing, and many people say they find the

relaxation that’s woven into the class to be very beneficial,” she explains. Jaffe is careful to avoid head-below-the-heart poses, which can be difficult for people who have nausea. “Sometimes the best thing to do when people are uncomfortable is to just prop them up with pillows in restorative mode and help them let go and relax,” she says. Yoga practice can help redirect people’s attention from their problems and help them focus on things they feel good about, Jaffe notes, “such as their heart and their spirit.”

Living in Technicolor

Yoga’s focus on connecting with the Divine can have a particular poignancy for cancer patients, who tend to be in touch with their own mortality. When people are diagnosed with cancer, “it’s like Dorothy landing in Oz,” Holtby says. “The intensity of living suddenly goes from black and white into Technicolor. I’m reminded by my students that our time here is so short and so bittersweet. The days race by, but every moment is

ephemeral and precious. That’s why we get on our mats in the first place: to call ourselves to be present.”

It’s important that yoga teachers encourage students who have cancer, but they should avoid making promises, Nischala Joy Devi cautions. “Not everyone is cured of cancer,” she says. “Some are helped to die. What yoga can do is help people enjoy their life for as long as they are here.”

Facing mortality often prompts healthy life changes, says Sudha Carolyn Lundeen, who was a 35-year-old nurse at New England Medical Center in 1984 when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. “Cancer was the kick in my butt that made me stop in my tracks and ask, ‘What am I living for? What is my life about?’” recalls Lundeen, who had taken a weekly yoga class for several years before her diagnosis. She had a lumpectomy, after which she decided to go to Kripalu for three months to immerse herself in a healthy lifestyle. There she learned what she calls “big Y” yoga, which is not just asana but an entire way of life.

“Yoga philosophy spoke directly to my experience,” she says. “For example, *satya* [truth] telling helped me recognize that ‘Yes, I have cancer, and in this very moment, most likely I am fine.’” The support and compassion she experienced at Kripalu convinced her to extend her three-month stay to 10 years, and she became one of the center’s most popular teachers.

In 1994, Lundeen’s breast cancer recurred, and she had surgery and radiation. “My experience with cancer has been a gift,” Lundeen says, citing a favorite quote from author Wayne Muller: “Knowing I will die, how then shall I live?” She explains that “cancer has been the hardest but most potent vehicle for change in my life. And yoga has given me some hefty tools to help me wake up and live a life that has more meaning and more joy.” ■

*Carol Krucoff, a registered yoga therapist, is coauthor (with her husband, Mitchell Krucoff) of *Healing Moves: How to Cure, Relieve, and Prevent Common Ailments with Exercise*. She lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*